

"KNOWING THE TIME:"

A DISCOURSE

ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF TIME,

DELIVERED IN ZION CHURCH,

ON THE FIRST SABBATH, (JANUARY 2,) OF 1853.

BY THE

REV. DR. WILKES.

MONTREAL:

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their number.

MONTREAL, January 5, 1853.

DEAR PASTOR,

I think your Sermon of last Sabbath forenoon fitted to be eminently useful, and worthy of being again and again read and pondered; and that it may be for those purposes in the hands of every member of the church and congregation, I beg you to take the trouble to extend your notes of it, and to give it to me for publication.

I am,

Yours very respectfully,

Rev. Dr. Wilkes.

MY DEAR SIR,

It is said that printed Sermons are never read. I should be sorry, if this be true, that you should expend the money required to print and that I should expend the time required to write out my MS. for the press, in vain. But it may be otherwise, with a discourse designed for private circulation among members of the church and congregation, to whom it was very recently addressed. If the thoughts suggested impressed their minds at the time, they may be desirous of renewing the impression by a perusal of them in the retirement of their chamber. And should one soul be benefited, we, my dear sir, shall be amply repaid for our respective parts of this publication. You will unite with me in the prayer, that by this and every other appropriate movement, our beloved church may be greatly blessed and prospered of the Lord.

Yours faithfully,

HENRY WILKES.

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"KNOWING THE TIME."

Knowing the time.—*Romans* xiii, 11.

WE have interchanged affectionate greetings with our respective domestic circles since the New Year hath superseded the Old One, and, as friends and neighbours, we have expressed to one another mutual desires that the year on which we have entered may be a prosperous and happy one. And now assembled in our house of worship on its second day, allow your Pastor to address to you Christian salutations, and to express the earnest and prayerful desire that this year may be distinguished by spiritual blessings. Such are confessedly the highest in their nature, as they are also the most enduring. Peculiar seasons demand appropriate sentiments, and suggest suitable topics of reflection. This season naturally brings out to every thoughtful mind that very serious matter, the rapid advance of time, and, in regard to ourselves, its approaching termination. Every year leaves its vacancies among us, and its newly-dug graves. Perhaps then, we cannot more profitably begin the Sabbaths and the religious ordinances of this year, than by uniting with our acts of worship, some meditations on the topic presented in the text, namely, TIME.

The inspired writer is engaged, in the context, in the work of urging upon the disciples of Christ the duty of energy and the necessity of wakefulness in his service. They must be up and doing "while it is day." They must "not sleep as do others," for it is day, and not night which is the proper time for sleep. And if through some sad torpor of spiritual vitality they are asleep, "it is high time for them to awake." That they may give practical heed to these exhortations, he indicates to them the importance of knowing the time. The questions which propose themselves to our minds in reflecting upon this implied injunction are: *What concerning time is it desirable for us to know? and what beneficial results might be anticipated from such know-*

ledge? These questions obviously suppose that the knowledge intended is rather experimental and practical, than speculative. As a consequence, the whole subject must be dealt with as of solemn practical interest. It is not my purpose to amuse you with speculations, nor to seek to startle you by original or second hand theories, but my desire is that we may reflect together for our permanent practical benefit on this great matter of TIME.

I.

Beginning then with the first of the two questions—What concerning time is it desirable for us to know?—it may be replied,

1. *Time should be known in its nature.* Some knowledge of the *nature* of an object lies at the basis of all accurate acquaintance with its working and influence. The definitions of time have been various. By one it has been quaintly described as “a fragment of eternity broken off at both ends.” Another more formally says, “it is finite, and successive duration distinguished by past, present and future, and measured by the revolutions of the heavenly bodies, which God has appointed for this end.” A poet says

“From old eternity’s mysterious orb
Was time cut off and cast beneath the skies,
The skies which watch him in his new abode,
Measuring his motions by revolving spheres.”

But as we can only know an object by its *qualities*, these being the only points concerning it capable of definition, or indeed of being conceived by the mind, we may regard time as *fleeting*. It is ever in progress. It never tires or stops to rest, not a moment. Since its birth it has had no holiday, no cessation. It advances in one steady, ceaseless, awful course, like some mighty river, whose current was never arrested for a single instant, but which pours itself ever and ever into the boundless ocean. We may regard it also as *irrevocable*. It cannot be recalled. Its waste cannot be repaired. Its misappropriation cannot be amended. Once gone, it is for ever gone. No power in the Universe can bring it back. It were vain to send a messenger after it, craving its return; he would not be listened to. Its chariot wheels were not made to roll backward. Its symbols

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all look and turn the one way, and that is *forward*. And then further it is a *certain thing*. You can depend upon it. It is characterized by undeviating regularity. You know without a shade of doubt that the next moment will come, and the next hour and the next day. In this feature it differs widely from the events which it continually brings up, and which are most uncertain, or rather most unlooked for. Here, so far as the sons of men are concerned, *contingency* has an undisputed reign. What unexpected changes occur in a single week! The entire course of our lives is affected oft times by some event which is to us unknown and unsuspected a single moment before it occurred. Such changes and their effects serve, among other things, to render prominent the *importance* of time. It is so pregnant with all our interests—its issues are so momentous, that it were difficult to exaggerate this character of *importance* as belonging to time. The apostle suggests it in his exhortation “redeeming the time”; *i. e.* husbanding it; rescuing it from waste; buying it up with eagerness; in fine, obtaining all one can, and losing none. Our Lord still more emphatically brings out the same idea in those remarkable words, “I must work the works of him that sent me WHILE IT IS DAY; THE NIGHT COMETH WHEN NO MAN CAN WORK.” Let these words of infinite wisdom be pondered until their meaning stands out in full view, and how *important* does time appear? While its fleeting hours remain, we may work for God and our generation. Our day is the interval, uncertain in duration but of immense import while it lasts, during which we may really work—lay the foundation and so far build the structure of our own everlasting well being and that of others. “The night cometh,”—how soon who can tell? “when no man can work”; when no foundation can be laid or superstructure erected.

2. *Time should be known in its use.* It is given to us to use, and not to trifle with. God requires its profitable employment, and an account ultimately of our stewardship in relation to it. Time, like all our other advantages, is given to us, not in absolute ownership, but as servants who are required to “occupy” until the Master summons them to their account. “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.” Thus the enjoyment of eternity should be the employment of time, during

which preparation is made for eternity. Everlasting happiness consists in glorifying and enjoying God: present duty demands that "whether we eat or drink or whatsoever we do, we should do all to the glory of God"; and when this is fulfilled, the former is secured. Such then is the right use of time. If we would truly *know* that use, its claims must be regarded in the light of eternity. What in that view are the sacrifices we have to make? What the duties we have to perform? What the objects we have to pursue? What the blessings we have to secure? What the race we have to run? What the goal we have to reach? in order to preparation for eternity. Answers to these questions will point out the true use of time: let it be diligently and honestly given to these great purposes. Alas! the multitude squander away its hours, and days, and years of untold preciousness, as if it were of no importance,—was entirely their own—left absolutely at their own disposal and never to be accounted for. Melancholy waste! Most criminal perverseness?

3. *Time should be known in its value.* And yet who can estimate that value? How may we adventure the arduous calculation? We have various modes of arriving at the idea of value, several of which may be suitably tried in the case before us. Thus, sometimes the question is determined *by scarcity*. Gems, pearls, diamonds and precious stones are valuable as they are rare;—the necessities and comforts of life increase in value as they become scarce. Shall this be the standard of our estimate of time? Then how prodigious its value! How scarce when we consider how much is gone, what is left, and what has to be done! "The day is far spent": the day of earthly probation. The shades of evening are gathering. "The night is at hand." But scarceness appears in another aspect of the case. There is but a single moment of it in the world at once, and *another is not given until that is gone*. The clock that strikes the passing hour informs us, not that we have so much time in possession, but that another portion of it is gone,—irrecoverably gone. For this reason a poet calls it—"The knell of a departed hour." It tolls but for the death of another portion of our time. The blessings of Divine Providence are many of them lavished upon us in generous profusion, so that they can be hoarded up for the future; but "time is dealt out by particles," or, like

some invaluable cordial, in single drops, that not one of them may be wasted. Surely the time is short:—

"Our hours

"Where are they? With the years beyond the flood,
It is the signal that demands *despatch*:
How much is to be done!"

Sometimes we determine the question of value by the advantages which may accrue through the possession of the object. This is really the only value of gold and silver. They are the medium of exchange. We can buy possessions with them—houses, lands, merchandise. Shall this be our standard? Then how amazing the value of time! What may not be gained by its improvement, and by the proper disposal of its hours! How may one enlarge his acquaintance with the truth—with God, His character, works, and ways:—and with self and fellowmen! What glorious and sublime topics are these, and how worthy of the utmost exertion of our mental and spiritual powers! Think of David's use of time when he thought out those great truths which find utterance in his Psalms. Think of Paul's use of time when he exercised his mind upon those wondrous realities on which he dilates in his discourses and letters. There have been instances of this sort in every age, standing out as blessed monuments to encourage us to estimate time highly, and as finger posts to direct us in the right use of it. Nor should we lose sight, among the advantages, of the largeness and strength of mind itself, which the proper use of time amid these high themes is fitted to impart.

"The man who consecrates his hours

By vigorous effort, and an honest aim,
At once he draws the sting of life and death,
He walks with nature, and her paths are peace.

Value is at other times estimated by the shortness of the period we shall have possession of the object, and the impossibility of recovering it when gone. There is a plant which puts forth its flower only once in a century: that plant in flower is deemed of value unparalleled in the vegetable kingdom. Shall this be the standard of estimate? Then how precious is time! To thousands of human beings destined to live for ever, time is but a

mere point—a hand breadth—a span. They live and breathe in it a few days, and then leave it for eternity. They enter upon the ceaseless current in a part very near the ocean. To us the river has been longer; time has been more extended: we have been long on the current and have not yet reached the ocean. And yet how short, and how soon to end! The shadow declineth; for the sun is descending behind the mountains. The vapour appears for a little while in the valley and on the side of the mountain, but the morning heat will soon rarify it, and it shall pass away. The weavers shuttle passes swiftly from hand to hand. So is time with us all; and once gone it will return no more. Where is yesterday: already where is the first day of the year? Gone! They are with the years beyond the flood; and it were as hopeful to attempt calling them back from their everlasting resting place as to recall the moment which hath just passed away.

4. *Time should be known in its management.* This is a most important part of the knowledge required. The management of time is often most wretched, and in some instances it is entirely neglected. Now "*there is a time* for every purpose under Heaven." God never gives us work to do without giving us time in which to do it. But, as we have seen, he does not lavish it upon us. It is one of the blessings of which we have none in excess. There is to us no spare, extra, unnecessary time. Accordingly it should be husbanded and managed. The precious gift should be thoroughly arranged and ever improved. Our Lord's course afforded a striking example of the management of time. When was he ever idle? We read of many things concerning him in the epitome of his life which the Gospels supply; but where do we read that *he was now at leisure*?—had some spare and extra time?—in short, *had nothing to do*? His leisure was employed in devotion, and he found his recreation in change of employment. His whole time was well occupied, and in order thereto, it was well managed.

In a subordinate degree such ancient worthies as Moses and David, Daniel and Paul, afford us distinguished examples of the management of time. In the presence of the first of these names as he guides, incites, and controls the two and a half millions of emigrants from Egypt on their way through the wilderness to the

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promised land, we stand and gaze in amazement at such management of his time, as enabled him punctually to administer the government, and at the same time to receive communications from heaven ; enact and promulgate laws ; set up new religious institutions ; and pen sacred Scripture. In some respects the same may be said of David and Daniel. They both lived in the midst of exciting scenes, and with the pressure of the cares of government heavy upon them ; yet they so managed time that they had not a little to give to acts of devotion, and to those compositions which have been ever since the admiration of intelligent and devout readers. And then Paul seems to have been an embodiment of the systematic management of time. It had been impossible to have accomplished what he achieved without the skilful management of his time.

Have you then nothing to do ? Is leisure your rule and employment the exception ? Is yours the paradise of some discontented people, who fret at labour, and exclaim " Oh that I had nothing to do ; how happy should I be if I could be free from toil ! " Or does time hang heavily on your hands ? Are you afflicted with ennui ? Then be assured that you are living in sin. You may unhesitatingly conclude that duties are neglected which would, if performed, quite fill up this, to you, tedious time. It is high time for you to awake out of sleep, and prayerfully to inquire, " Lord what will thou have me to do ?

On the other hand ; have you no time for the performance of that work which God and your own conscience say ought to be done ? Have you no time for regular and thoughtful private devotion ? No time to read the Scriptures and pray ? No time to consider your ways,—to reflect upon your relations to God,—and to come to decision in the matter of personal religion ? Have you no time to gather your family together morning and evening for domestic worship ? Have you no time to think of the interests of your Lord's Kingdom—to lay yourselves out in some department for its advancement,—and to pray as well as act for the salvation of men ? If you have no time for these obvious and most solemn duties, be assured that there is sad mismanagement of your time. It is not equitably distributed. Its hours, its moments are not wisely assigned. There is something utterly wrong which needs adjustment. It is of moment unspeakable that you

should know time in its management. Ascertain the duties devolving upon you, and also the time at your command, and then let every hour have its work. In order to this, *have a plan*. Remodel and alter it from time to time, if you will, but *have it*. If you fail now and again in carrying it out, still *have it*; be not discouraged by failures, but rally again to your plan. It will at least assist you in the proper management of time, and its existence will reprove you when time is mismanaged or lost. It will prove an incitement to conscience to be faithful in its admonitions concerning our responsibility for the possession of time. What incalculable disorders arise in society from the mismanagement of time! Business neglected: duties left undone: just expectations disappointed: confusion induced: souls lost for want of "knowing the time."

5. *Time should be known in its termination.* Time, unlike eternity, has a consummation. The day of judgement will be the *last day*, and most *eventful* since days began to be numbered. Yet, "of that day and that hour knoweth no man;" we only know that *it will come*. Destined as we are to take part in the transactions of that "great and terrible day of the Lord," it becomes us to "know that time," that is, to prepare for the unknown but certain termination of all time. "Beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness; looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat," 2 *Peter* iii, 8—12.

But to each of us there is a much nearer termination of *our time*. And who can tell *when? where? how?* What an affecting illustration of this inability to know had we last week! A

the duties demand, and then have a plan. I, but have it. I will it; be not an. It will at and its existence lost. It will admonitions time. What management of expectations of "know-

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family retired at night in usual health, and with the ordinary expectation of rising in the morning. They had doubtless made preparations for the next day. The mother had determined her course, and the servant hers; while the two boys had their plans for the morrow. But they did not see the morrow. During that fatal night they were wrapt in flames, and were brought out in the morning blackened and shrivelled corpses. How little they knew *when, where, how* would be the termination of their time! It may perhaps be replied, since we know nothing of the end of our time, it is not a practical matter. Can we then know nothing regarding it? Is there no practical question connected with it? Yes! we can know our state and preparedness for an end which comes at an uncertain time. Men generally, almost uniformly die as they live. If they live believers in Christ, humble penitents at the foot of the cross, godly and devoted servants of the Master, obedient children of God, they always die in peace. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace." If on the other hand, they live in rebellion against God, with no concern for their eternal interests, "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world," they die in their sin, and are "driven away in their wickedness." Surely then it befits us to *know the time*.

II.

We must now with more brevity give our attention to the second of the two questions, namely, "what beneficial results might be anticipated from such knowledge;" a knowledge which, be it remembered, is less speculative than practical; not the knowledge of some problem which has perplexed the learned in past ages, but which when known is only of scientific or literary interest, but the knowledge of what practically concerns us every day, whether old or young, rich or poor, lettered or illiterate.

Should we know the time as we are instructed and ought to know it, the result in our own souls will be:

1. *Unfeigned gratitude to God.* Our times are in His hand, He distributes them according to His will, so that our preservation thus far is the effect of His goodness. Some whom we have known, have been as nipped flowers, just allowed to bloom for a

short day, and then they have fallen. Others have been cut down in the zenith of their strength and influence, while still others have been gathered home as a shock of corn ripe. The past year has been marked by a greater number of deaths among us than any previous year of our history as a church. We have laid in the grave two sisters in Christ who were taken away in the morning of early womanhood, one after prolonged illness, the other a young mother without any premonition. From among the long attendants on this ministry, one has been removed in the maturity of manhood, leaving behind widow and fatherless children. And, from among the aged, the Lord has removed two venerable brethren and a sister, who had passed or were on the verge of three score years and ten. What a debt of gratitude do we owe for continued life—for the present possession of time, and for all past mercies. But, my brethren, let our gratitude be practical as well as vocal: let us prayerfully enquire “Lord what wilt thou have me to do?” and having ascertained what, cheerfully do it.

2. *Deep contrition of soul.* If we know *our* time, we shall have strong convictions of our sad waste of it, and abuse of it, in needless sleep, in idle lounging, in useless amusements, in unprofitable conversation, in unwise appropriation, and in evil doing. Oh, how grievous when thoughtfully considered, is this waste of time. How much might have been done for the promotion of one's own spiritual interests, the removal of the unsatisfactoriness of one's piety, and its complete renovation of spirit and character; how much might have been done for the instruction, happiness, religious interests of the family; how much might have been done for the interests of the church—how much prayer offered, labour performed, gifts bestowed:—how much of the best part of one's being and energies might have been consecrated to the promotion of God's glory, in the time which has been squandered, or worse than wasted during the past. Such considerations seriously and prayerfully entertained are fitted to place us in the dust of self abasement on account of our misuse of time.

3. *Unfeigned repentance and approach to the blood of sprinkling.* Our injured and despoiled moments have carried up their report to that throne, whither they might have borne welcome tidings, had we been faithful; but now how dark the record! We cannot cancel the characters there inscribed. The

facts are changeless now, and their record is indelible. But through the riches of Divine grace we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One. To Him let us repair. By knowing the time, we shall feel our need of pardoning mercy; and in approaching with sincere repentance the blood of atonement, our guilt will be washed away. Oh, for such convictions on this subject as would bring us all into the position of praying penitents. It certainly befits us to stand with the publican, smiting our breast, and exclaiming, "God be merciful to me a sinner." We need more intense convictions of our responsibility for our use of time.

4. *Sincere desires and holy resolves.* Desires for amendment will flow from convictions of wrong-doing, united with the principle of love to God. We cannot rest if we love the Lord, so long as we are living in any course of disobedience to His authority. If truly aware of our past wastefulness or mis-appropriation of time, and convinced of the guilt thereof, our desires will be sincerely towards a thorough reformation. We shall be anxious to begin anew this year, adjusting our time and our engagements in accordance with a better model. These desires will be expressed in prayer, and they will be accompanied by solemn and determined resolves to have no more waste of a boon so precious, no more throwing away of days or hours; nay, even of minutes, for the fragments of time are too valuable to be lost. The knowledge of time should lead to a fresh consecration of all our powers to God. A decided profession of faith is called for, and the scriptural entertainment of the assurance of faith. We should begin the year dissatisfied, with a doubting, halting, unsatisfactory profession, and with hearts fully consecrated to God. Moreover, in order that a practical turn may be given to your thoughts and purposes, let there be this year a fresh use of means for the promotion of the divine glory in the conversion and salvation of men, a fresh consecration of property to the Master. We take leave to urge upon you a review of the prosperity of the year past, and the duty of presenting free-will thank offerings to the cause of Christ. Remember that you are only Stewards; and that it is required of a steward that he be found faithful.

We are speaking of sincere desires and holy resolves. But are we not addressing some who have yet to begin a spiritual

course. Hitherto they have been asleep : fast-locked in the arms of that enemy of their souls. They have never shaken themselves loose from those ramified agencies which bind the heart to the things seen and temporary, and which produce an utter disregard of the things unseen and eternal. To use John Bunyan's expressive imagery, they dwell "in the City of Destruction." Now, surely, were you to know the time, it would awaken and arouse you, my hearers, agitate and alarm you, and induce the cry on your part, of the two blind men who appealed to our Lord as he passed out of Jericho—"Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David." You could not rest another hour in the City of Destruction, but would feel constrained at once to go up from its dark and dangerous precincts:—You could not rest until you had found Jesus of Nazareth as your Saviour and your Lord. Begin the year with thorough consecration of yourselves to the Redeemer.

5. *Blessed Hopes.* Such knowledge of time as we have, spoken of, must cherish in the Christian bosom, blessed hopes of that heaven in which time is consummated and ended, and eternity is ever present. Its wise and diligent use forms a constant preparation for our Father's house of many mansions. As it is well managed, the mind continually turns to the final account and to ultimate issues; and it is indeed blessed to have a well founded conviction that the trials and toils of this present, shall through God's grace issue in an everlasting rest of joy and love. We lose much of enjoyment, as well as no little motive power, if we neglect to review and cherish these blessed hopes. Be familiar, my brethren, with the things revealed concerning the celestial country, and the city of our God; cherish high anticipations of that glorious end of the Christian pilgrimage. Let your employment of time have steady reference to the eternity which follows it; and may the Lord God of Israel abundantly bless you this year in all attempts to "lay up treasure in heaven, where moth and rust corrupt not, and where thieves cannot break through and steal."

Thus, beloved brethren, having endeavoured to lead your thoughts through an inquiry, as to what concerning time we ought to know, and as to some of the advantages to be derived from such knowledge, let our service be closed under the full impression of the sentiment amid which our text stands, "And that

knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light."

We have no time to lose or to waste; for the work to be done is great and of momentous import; and there is but a brief space in which it may be done. These minds and hearts have to be cultivated in preparation for effective living;—for peaceful dying, —for a blessed eternity. How long we shall have opportunity to prosecute this work, who can tell? And yet what a work! How little do the matters seem in comparison with it which most do interest the world's people—the state of the markets, the prosperity of commerce, or the movements of political parties! Oh my brethren, the concerns of the soul, and its interests for eternity are of moment to us so vast as to sink every other thing into comparative insignificance. And shall we not give time—much earnest time to the soul? Shall we be busy about every other thing and neglect this principal thing?

Moreover we have a work to do for God and truth, having its sphere among our fellow-men, which also demands the wise and diligent use of our time. The Saviour has committed to his disciples the business of preaching the gospel to every creature under heaven. We, who profess to love him, cannot, without great sin, neglect this work. Multitudes all around us are really perishing for lack of the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Myriads of our world's people are dwelling in darkness and in the region and shadow of death. And

"Shall we whose souls are lighted
With wisdom from on high;
Shall we to men benighted
The lamp of life deny?"

Forbid it every hallowed impulse that can quicken the Christian's heart! Yet if we would fulfil this duty we must give time and thought to it. We must pray as well as labour. We must know the time. May we begin this year with unwonted earnestness on these great points. The Lord grant us grace to continue throughout the year diligent in his service, should it please Him to spare us:—And when the salvation, which is now nearer than when we believed, shall have at length come, may it be truly said of us, they served their generation by the will of God, and now they sleep in Jesus.